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Sardanapalus and Gender: Examining Gender in the Works of Byron and Delacroix

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SARDANAPALUS AND GENDER:

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis discusses the gender standards as portrayed in Lord Byron's play *Sardanapalus* (1824) and Eugène Delacroix's painting *Death of Sardanapalus* (1828). These Romantic artists were part of a movement that changed gender conventions forever. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought about a culture that was more visual than ever and symbols of gender identity were everywhere. Rules of masculinity evolved from valuing raw power to including middle class virtues like moderation. Women continued to be objects of male desire but also began to represent the nation and its history. To explore the specific gender relationships within Byron's play and Delacroix's painting, this thesis analyzes both works and builds on existing scholarship to provide a new analysis that changes the way we look at Sardanapalus. Even though Byron is cited as the source for Delacroix's painting, their approaches to gender are vastly different. Byron presents an alternative ideal man in Sardanapalus while Delacroix rejects this new ideal and depicts Sardanapalus as a weak king, relaxing in a corner while destruction is all around him.

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Sardanapalus is one of an effeminate king of luxury whose people rebel because they believe he is not fulfilling his kingly duties. Thought to be a combination of the fates of three Assyrian kings: Ashurbanipal, Shamash-shum-ukin, and Sin-shar-ishkun, this story was handed down for centuries as told by Greek historian Diodorus Siculus. It is an ancient story of an ancient king that gained notoriety in the nineteenth century when the English poet Lord Byron wrote a tragedy based on the account of the end of Sardanapalus's reign. Byron opens his play with Salemenes, the king's brother-in-law, telling of Sardanapalus's feminine behavior and calling him names like she-king. Then, Byron reveals a plot to overthrow the king, which soon breaks out into a full battle. As Sardanapalus decides what to do about the rebellion, it is his favorite concubine, Myrrha who spurs him into action and onto the battlefield. The rebels quickly triumph over those still loyal to the king. Since it is obvious the battle was lost, Sardanapalus leaves the battlefield to die on a pyre with Myrrha. Soon after Byron's epic was published, French artist Eugène Delacroix completed one of his masterpieces, the painting *Death of Sardanapalus* (Figure 1) which depicts the final scene of Sardanapalus dying on the pyre.

Delacroix painted this scene as one of great chaos. The viewer's eye begins with the nude women in the foreground, either the one throwing herself upon the massive bed or the one stabbed from behind by the man. From there, the audience takes in the extravagant opulence of Sardanapalus's enormous wealth and the sadness of all those treasures being destroyed. Sardanapalus himself lies upon the bed, partially in the shadows, watching the destruction somewhat passively. The smoke rising in the

background is a foreshadowing of what is to come, the burning of the pyre and death of the king of Assyria. Giving some sense of unity and cohesion to this otherwise hectic scene, Delacroix utilized a similar color palette throughout the image. The golds, browns, and vibrant reds appear in every area of this painting from the reds of the fabrics and trappings on the horse to the golds of the treasures scattered about the room.

It is clear that Delacroix intended this piece to be a master painting of his from his own writings. In a journal entry from July 1824, Delacroix mentions that he must improve his skills (with regards to his painting), take time to make more and more sketches, and even talks of working in marble to learn to be more patient with his art.[1] The *Death of Sardanapalus* was originally meant to be displayed at the Paris Salon that opened on November 4, 1827 but Delacroix was not yet satisfied with his work. He wrote to M. David d'Angers, a man on the selection committee for the Salon, to apologize for his work not being ready to be displayed and to promise that it would be finished for the Salon the following year. He goes on to say, "*le diable de tableau demande encore tant de travail que je frémis de tout ce qui me reste à faire*" [2], meaning "this devilish painting still needs so much work that I shudder at all that remains for me to do." As Delacroix promised, the *Death of Sardanapalus* was finished for the 1828 Salon and it was displayed for the first time on February 2, 1828. [3]

Although Delacroix clearly put much thought and work into this painting, it suffered the harshest criticism of any of his works. An influential journalist and critic,

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[1] Walter Pack, trans. *The Journal of Eugene Delacroix* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1980), 99.
[2] André Joubin, *Correspondence Générale: D'Eugène Delacroix : Tome I : 1804-1837* (Paris : Librarie Plon, 1935), 206-7. Translation is my own.
[3] Elizabeth A. Fraser, *Delacroix: Art and Patrimony in Post-Revolutionary France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 116.

Louis Vitet, wrote about Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* in the *Globe* two months after it was first hung at the Salon. He praised Delacroix's choice of an imaginative subject and use of color, but his analysis quickly turned sour when he wrote that Delacroix needed to learn "to distinguish a painting from a sketch". [4] He was also disturbed by the scene's lack of order and even said he felt threatened by the enormity of the bed. Another critic, Étienne-Jean Delécluze, chastised Delacroix for cutting off portions of the figures to the sides of the painting and said that Delacroix was "violated the basic rules of art". [5]

Those who approved of Delacroix's work were far outnumbered by those who did not. Victor Hugo, a French poet, was one of the few who held a high opinion of Delacroix's *Sardanapalus*. He consistently wrote praises for the work to various papers and called those who disliked it narrow-minded. [6] It was not until the Louvre purchased the painting in 1921 that the general public began to look at Delacroix's vision as that of a genius.

Byron experienced the complete opposite reception that Delacroix received. Some did think of his play as a satire on contemporary monarchy but Byron himself squelched such rumors himself and assured those concerned that the story was something much more personal and complex. One critic, Tom Moore, wrote that he was delighted by the originality of Byron's Sardanapalus character, especially his "sly, insinuated sarcasms".[7] It seemed that the whole of European culture was fascinated with everything related to Lord Byron. "Byronism" was a noun already established by the time Bryon wrote *Sardanapalus.* Such a term shows his extensive influence in European culture of the time.

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[4] Jack J. Spector, *Delacroix: The Death of Sardanapalus* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974, 81.
[5] Ibid, 81.
[6] Ibid, 83.
[7] Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002, 397.

Thus, Byron's immense popularity effected how thoroughly *Sardanapalus* was dispersed as well.[8] The fame of Byron alone was enough to spread his Sardanapalus story throughout Europe but gender expectations were being solidified at this time, so a story about an effeminate king naturally attracted quite a bit of attention.

In this paper, I will be discussing gender and how socially constructed roles clash with the behaviors of characters in the Sardanapalus story. I will examine the differences in how the genders are represented as told by Byron and Delacroix in their works. While Byron is often cited as the inspiration for Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*, their approaches to the issue of gender are quite different. In his play, Bryon presents an alternative ideal man to which, in his painting, Delacroix refuses to accept. It is important to note that throughout this paper, as I refer to Sardanapalus, I refer to the character presented by Byron and Delacroix rather than the historical figure.

Both gender and Orientalism have been discussed at length by scholars, yet no one has investigated the Sardanapalus story and gender beyond mentioning that Sardanapalus was an effeminate king. I draw on previous scholarship to demonstrate the relationships between gender and Orientalism in this story. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said showed that although other cultures had influence on the idea of the Orient, this idea was mainly an invention of the Europeans. The Orient was the location of Europe's richest and oldest colonies, so understandably Europeans were intrigued by the area and the culture.[9] Archaeologists were also making new discoveries at ancient Near Eastern sites that filled European museums with fresh artifacts to captivate bourgeois

[8] Susan J. Wolfson, "A Problem Few Dare Imitate: Sardanapalus and Effeminate Character", *ELH* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1991), 869.
[9] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 1.

minds. Because of this, an "Oriental renaissance"[10] took place, meaning European interest in all things pertaining to the Orient was renewed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and a new awareness of the Orient arose.

This renewed interest in all things Oriental has also sparked some scholarly interest in how the Orient related to gender. Reina Lewis's book, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation,* gives a thorough look into the relationship between the Orient, women, and culture. She studies everything from women as represented in art and literature, to women as artists and specifically at women as Orientalists. One such artist, Henriette Browne, painted works that portrayed the Oriental harem.[11] Her harem images, for example her *A Visit to a Harem* from 1860, (Figure 2) are more documentary in nature and serve as an example of how women's art differed from that of men during the same time period. Lewis examines Orientalism using a very different lens than Said did for his book. She gives women the spotlight and focuses on how women interacted with Orientalism.

By the late 1820s, the Romantic Movement had reached a crescendo in France, which triggered a change in gender relationships. These relationships are brought to the forefront in Byron and Delacroix's Sardanapalus stories. They each approached gender issues in unique ways and portrayed male and female characters in various lights. Both have examples of women and men acting as they should according to the gender standards and both have examples of these genders acting differently than they should according to the same rules. For Byron, myth was a creative tool. He utilized

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[10] Said, 42.
[11] Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*, New York: Routledge, 1996, 85.

mythopoesis which transposes mythological stories into tales that carry symbolic meaning.[12] Byron's Sardanapalus mocked the prevailing religion and traditions of his people as he believed them to be part of a worn-out ideology. As king, he chose to create a new myth through his lifestyle and mode of death, hoping to better the Assyrian empire. In this way, Byron put forth his idea of the new ideal man and ruler: a poet, one who put more emphasis on pleasure and less on warfare. Delacroix took his representation of this king in a different direction and presented him as a regent lazing upon a bed while others destroyed all that brought him pleasure in his life. For Delacroix, Sardanapalus is not the poet presented by Byron but the effeminate king his people saw in him.

ESTABLISHMENT OF GENDER STANDARDS

In order to discuss differences in gender representations, one must first examine how genders were viewed. George Mosse's *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* provides great insight to the history and development of the ideal man. Ideas pertaining to what one gender should or should not be formed overgender i a great length of time and evolved alongside events of the world.

A large aspect of masculine culture at this time was dueling, an event that was highly ritualized. Older manly virtues like willpower, honor and courage all found an important place within this custom, as did physical prowess, now with more importance than ever. Honor dictated that you did not to duel anyone outside your social status,

[12] Stephen C. Behrendt, ed. *History & Myth: Essays on English Romantic Literature*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990, 166.

willpower and courage enabled you to fight, and physical prowess increased your chances of claiming victory. Dueling was a way for a man to prove his worth and show that he was manly. The physical abilities that accompanied dueling became necessary to defend one's honor and the honor of one's family. Hence, the male body was examined for virility, strength, and courage during a duel.[13] As Sardanapalus was particularly noted for his distaste for fighting, it is easy to see that audiences of this time would see him as the opposite of manly. While he does fight when necessary, it is only when it is absolutely needed and even then, he requires a push – from a woman – to see the value in doing so. Men were meant to embody activity and women were meant to be more passive, not the other way around as it was for Sardanapalus and Myrrha.[14]

The construction of the modern idea of masculinity was closely linked to the new bourgeois society developing during the eighteenth century. It was not an ideal of raw power. The ideal man needed to be balanced with self-control and moderation – both being a problem for Sardanapalus. He was the ultimate king of luxury, always followed by members of his harem, dressed in flowing robes, and attending an endless line of banquets. To be considered manly, one had to possess courage but also be compassionate and loyal.[15] These qualities were important for European societies to function better at a riotous time in history, so focusing on these new virtues not only helped the individuals but their nations as well. Making traits that would help the nation part of the characteristics of the ideal man was a way of ensuring the health of the nation. If the men

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[13] George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 23.
[14] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art*, New York: Routledge, 1988, 30.
[15] Mosse, 18.

practiced more moderation in their lives, it would help the nation be healthier because there were more resources to spread around to the rest of the people.

Standards of ugliness were also developed at this time as the opposite of the ideal. Cowardice, lustfulness, lack of control over passions, and lack of morals all marked an ugly person. These words were often associated with those out of favor like gypsies, vagrants, and even Jews.[16] To further distance themselves from such undesirable groups, high class individuals could show themselves to have the opposite traits, those of the ideal man, therefore showing themselves to be of a higher moral class and deserving of their higher social status. These ideas work similarly when comparing men and women. Men could demonstrate their worthiness of being viewed as superior to women by exhibiting their honor, courage, physical prowess, and control over their passions – all things that women were not thought to possess. For instance, when describing how Sardanapalus first encountered Myrrha, he says he found her "femininely raging" like a young lioness and explained that this was because "all passions in excess are female".[17]

It was also during the eighteenth century that looks began to factor into masculinity. With the Enlightenment, there was a great connection between body and soul. If one looked beautiful on the outside, it was a sign that one was a good person morally as well. Thus, outward appearance became a symbol of inner worth. To improve their outward appearance, many turned to exercising, and accordingly there was a rise in gymnastics in Europe. Various texts about modern gymnastics, like J.F.C. Guts Muth's *Gymnastics for Youth* of 1793, were published and republished throughout the eighteenth

[16] Mosse, 59.
[17] Lord Byron, *Sardanapalus: A Tragedy*, London: John Murray, 1824, 107.

and nineteenth centuries. These texts discussed the usefulness of physical exercise and contributed greatly to the rise of gymnasiums in Europe. More and more men began to have the bodies of ancient Greek athletes that European society admired so much. Since their bodies were becoming more beautiful, their souls were also believed to be more beautiful and of a higher moral standard. They were not only bettering themselves but society as a whole by becoming manlier. Looks factoring into manliness may seem like a point in favor of Sardanapalus's masculinity but he ventures too far over the line of beauty into the realm of women. His physical beauty is seen as excessive and womanish rather than a reflection of good moral character.

As masculinity evolved in this period, gymnasiums became a substitute for traditional warfare. This stereotype of the strong, physically able man was reinforced by revolutions and wars of this time. The warrior male was the climax to the concept of masculinity. He possessed all the moral virtues of the ideal man as well as the physical proficiency of the ancient Greeks.[18] Heroism, death and sacrifice became associated with manliness as these were important attributes for soldiers to possess during periods like those of the French Revolution.[19] Their strong bodies served them well in completing the tasks needed and their perceived higher moral worth justified their actions as well as gave them a stronger sense of purpose as a nation.

Here is where Sardanapalus fails his people the greatest. He does not wish to spill blood if it is not needed and the only circumstances where he believes it to be necessary are extreme. Much preferring to stay in the palace and feast with his concubines, the

[18] Mosse, 107.
[19] Ibid, 50.

image of a warrior king is completely absent in representations of Sardanapalus. It is also a point where Byron himself identifies with his character. Byron fought in the Greek War of Independence but only once he deemed it necessary. His arrival in Missolonghi was one that a king like Sardanapalus might enjoy: muskets were fired accompanied by wild music and a throng of soldiers and citizens of the city. This arrival even inspired a painting of its own, Theodoros Vryzakis's *Byron's Arrival at Missolonghi* (1861). (Figure 3) Much like Sardanapalus, Byron was careful to choose his attire for the occasion. He stepped out in full military uniform complete with gold epaulettes. [20] His presence in the war-torn area was meant to give the troops a boost of confidence and it certainly accomplished its goal – they even named a brigade after him, the Byron Brigade. Just like Sardanapalus, Byron was not necessarily seen as manly, yet he would fight when he found a worthy cause.

In this way, Sardanapalus is a reflection of Byron himself. Although Byronism had a firm hold on European society and he was popular, Byron was disreputable. Just like Sardanapalus, Byron was an anti-hero. Throughout his life he was criticized for his aristocratic excesses including his tendency to spend money freely even if he did not have it, his various romantic endeavors with more than one gender, his affair with his half-sister, and his self-imposed exile.[21] Even with all these negative aspects, Byron was celebrated as a great man and one of the best Romantic poets. He was not seen as the manliest of men but Byron fought when he believed it was needed in the Greek War of Independence. Sardanapalus did not have many supporters but there were some like the

[20] MacCarthy, 490.
[21] Ibid, 246.

loyal servant, Pania who saw the king for who he was: a benevolent ruler who would defend his kingdom if it needed him.

With all of the developments in the ideals of manly beauty, the ideals of womanly beauty remained traditional, especially in the works of Delacroix. As soon as this ideal of male beauty was established, it asserted itself to be the superior beauty. There was a strictness of form missing from the female body that made the masculine sense of beauty the better ideal human form for this era.[22] Women had long been viewed as not merely mothers and educators of children but overt objects of male desire and domination and this tradition continued in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Genevan philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau even wrote that "woman was especially made to please man".[23] Myrrha exhibits this characteristic completely. At the beginning of Byron's play when Sardanapalus asks her if she wishes to stay with him or retire with the other members of the harem, she replies only that she will do whatever pleases him.[24] This meek aspect of Myrrha's character is in accordance with the ideal woman behaving as a servant to man – an idea that was a remnant of centuries of gender expectations.

While this may not have been a particularly positive aspect of womanly beauty, it effected culture immensely and is an aspect demonstrated thoroughly in the art of the time. Woman serving only to please man was an idea that ran rampant in European societies. Masculine and feminine beauty were no longer seen as complementary and

[22] Mosse, 75.
[23] Ibid, 28.
[24] Byron, 9.

were anything but equal. Emphasis on the male form and almost complete ignorance of the female form is a trend that continued through the mid-nineteenth century.[25]

Both masculine and feminine figures became public symbols representing the nation during these tumultuous times. During second half of the eighteenth century, an increasingly visual culture developed. The public itself became inundated with symbols and symbolic meaning relating to beauty, power, and history; these were no longer symbols shown in art alone. Men and women began to embody aspects of human nature that were seen as beneficial. While both men and women represented the nation, they portrayed very different aspects of the nation. The male body symbolized society's need for order and progress as well as middle class virtues like moderation. They personified activity in general, notions of the mind, social activities, rational thinking, and authority. On the other hand, women embodied the motherly qualities of the nation and pointed to its traditions and history.[26] Occasionally, they represented nature, needs of the body, irrationality, passivity, timelessness, and even a victim.[27] Myrrha demonstrates her motherly instincts at the king's bedside after he wakes from a nightmare in the middle of Byron's tragedy. Sardanapalus hesitates to tell her the details of his dream, unsure that she could bear it but she assures him that she can and will.[28] This scene depicts woman as a solid rock for man to lean upon, something he may rely on in difficult times of his life. At other times, women were depicted as the lethal sex or the destroyer of harmony – as in

[25] Mosse, 28. This does not mean that women were not seen as beautiful of course and there was no cessation of depicting the nude woman as beautiful in art. I merely mean to show that it was manly beauty that underwent the biggest changes and received the most attention during this period in time.
[26] Ibid, 8.
[27] Pollock, 30.
[28] Byron, 115.

the Adam and Eve story.[29] Women were capable of passionate, faithful and pure love, even though they were irrational and impulsive.[30]

The idea of woman as the more dangerous sex was prevalent all over Europe. While they did possess the positive virtues of a mother, those virtues could quickly turn to vices with or without just cause. Images of women as executioners infiltrated the art world and helped shape gender relationships. There are two basic groups of women as executioners: women killing for political reasons and women killing as an act of passion. The first type can be exemplified by paintings of Judith slaying Holofernes like that of Caravaggio from 1598 (Figure 4) or that of Artemisia Gentileschi from 1614-1620. (Figure 5) In these, we see woman as the hero, completing a task typically reserved for men. While Judith may be undertaking a political murder that greatly helps the Israelites, she is still dangerous as she is crossing the boundary into the realm of men. The fact that she lures Holofernes into a false sense of security with her beauty illustrates another facet of the reason why women as executioners were so feared. This trope is a tradition within itself, including images like Sandro Botticelli's *Mars and Venus* (1483) (Figure 6) where after intercourse, Venus's cohorts (in this case, the putti), disarm the sleeping Mars. Peter Paul Rubens continued the tradition with his *Samson and Delilah* (1609-1610). (Figure 7) With the Judith and Holofernes story, we see a clearly political motive, helping the nation of Israel. This theme of women killing men became popular and was known as the dangers of "the power of women".[31]

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[29] Pollock, 30.
[30] Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender*, New York: Routledge, 1993, 23.
[31] Pollock, 116.

The second type of woman as executioner is shown in another of Delacroix's works, *Medea* (1838). (Figure 8) Here we have Medea about to kill her own children as an act of revenge on Jason who betrayed her. There is no doubt that she personifies the Romantic notion of the irrational and destructive power of woman. Her character is dangerous is more ways than just killing her children. She manipulated Jason by agreeing to help him retrieve the Golden Fleece only after he promised to take her with him and marry her. When they had completed their task, Jason did as he promised and as they were fleeing, Medea distracted her father by killing her own brother – yet another action that crossed gender boundaries with its brutality. Later, she conspired to have the daughters of a political leader kill him so Jason could take the man's throne. Having crossed gender boundaries as well as moral boundaries several times, it is easy to see why Medea makes an excellent example of woman as executioner in the name of passion. Both of these types of women as executioners were popular themes for moral tales of the power of women.[32] Women in power were seen as something to be feared and a notion that was to be quelled if at all possible.

Thus, the episode in Byron's play when Myrrha becomes the personification of Nike and spurs Sardanapalus into action would have been quite upsetting to a nineteenth century audience. She is shown several times to have a temper and to be capable of great violence. Byron was drawing on this trope of the dangerous woman in power to add to the drama of Myrrha's character. In a way, the audience was not only relieved when the king took her place as warrior because it was what he should have done as a man but also because he took power from a woman. Immediately after he was convinced to enter the

[32] Pollock, 118.

battle, Myrrha was subdued and order was restored when she returned to the state of a subservient woman.

When the Romantic Movement began in the nineteenth century, it blurred the lines of gender division, making it more confusing to realize when established gender norms were crossed. Numerous ambiguities in rules of gender behavior appear with this movement, some of which Byron and Delacroix include in their Sardanapalus stories. The nineteenth century was also the time that the word effeminate came into general usage. Among the first definitions were "unmanly softness and delicacy".[33] This crossing of gender boundaries is partially why the Sardanapalus story received so much attention. When Byron wrote his *Sardanapalus,* he knew how popular it would be, both as a mythological story and as a contemporary discussion of gender.[34] He knew that he was presenting the world with a version of an ideal man that contrasted with that which was already established. Effeminate men and manly women go against Greek ideals of beauty and therefore are not desirable characteristics in European cultures. In Wilhelm von Humboldt's 1831 poem *The Amazons,* his characters crossed gender norms yet managed to retain their womanly appearances within the newly established standards of the nineteenth century. These women were glorious in battle but, unlike men, they knew no joy in it and there was no certainty of victory. This is why they were viewed as heroic characters, unlike Sardanapalus whose eternal epitaph is effeminate or man-queen because he also took no joy from battle.[35] The idea of the reluctant warrior was a relatively new one and demonstrates how Byron began to present Sardanapalus as an

[33] Mosse, 9.
[34] Wolfson, 867.
[35] Mosse, 55.

alternative ideal man. Byron's Sardanapalus was a man for whom war was a last resort, much like the Amazonian women of von Humboldt's poem and Byron himself as is obvious from his timing for entering the Greek War of Independence.

Many of the changes discussed were a product of the Romantic Movement and of the turbulent relations between countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With an increasingly visual culture, ideals of manliness and womanliness were expressed in various ways. Byron introduced Europeans to a new ideal of manliness with Sardanapalus. The evolution of gender relationships was also guided by the renewed interest in the Orient. Even though standards of gender may have differed in the Near East, Europeans still impressed their ideas upon images and literature concerning Oriental cultures.

GENDER IN ORIENTALISM

Artists of the Romantic Movement were much freer in depicting their emotions, fantasies, and political beliefs. Along with this, their subject matter expanded from previous artist's choice of themes. In the late eighteenth century, Rousseau envisioned a "noble savage"[36] who remained untainted by European civilization and its decadence. The savage Rousseau imagined became conflated with people of the Near East. This fascination contained an element of escapism as well since the beginning of Romanticism aligns with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in France. People felt the need to

[36] Donald A. Rosenthal, *Orientalism, the Near East in French Painting 1800-1880*, Rochester: Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, 1982, 27.

escape from their new lives. Both Byron and Delacroix were avid leaders of Orientalism and capitalized on its existence by completing many Orientalist works, including their Sardanapalus stories.

The intrigue surrounding Oriental culture was only increased when the people concerned were women. The 1872 entry for "femme" in the Larousse Dictionary read in part that "degeneration, like the improvement, of races always begins with the female sex".[37] When speaking of gender, women were seen as inferior but a foreign women, especially those from certain nations, were seen as even lower. Therefore, it was even more tolerable to depict them or discuss them in a demeaning manner. This same edition of the Larousse Dictionary presented ideological notions of race and gender as facts. For example, it stated that Asian women prefer European white men to those of their own countries and that blacks were more inclined to lasciviousness than whites. Such racial theories about Near Eastern people gained popularity along with all things Oriental. These ideas were illustrated by paintings like Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Slave Market* of 1866. (Figure 9) In this work, Gérôme allows the French male viewer to remain morally superior because he could enjoy the body of a female slave of an inferior race.

Not only were the male viewers superior to the women in the image but to the men as well. They stood on the outside of the social and cultural values of the races depicted and were able to judge both the men and the women portrayed.[38] Much in the same way, readers of Bryon's tragedy and viewers of Delacroix's painting caught a glimpse into the Near Eastern world without actually having to enter it. Oriental men who

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[37] Doy, *Women and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century France 1800-1852,* London: Leicester University Press, 1998, 223.
[38] Ibid, 222-223.

adhered to European standards of manliness were still not seen as equals to European men. For instance, the king's brother-in-law Salemenes was portrayed as possessing many of the characteristics of an ideal man. However, he was still merely an Assyrian, not European. Also, Byron imbued Salemenes with certain character flaws that came from old gender standards. Several times in the play, Salemenes jumped to a severe punishment and did not use rational thinking to guide his actions. By including flaws like this, Byron abided by the trend of the nineteenth century to depict Near Eastern people as inferior while still pushing forth his alternative version of an ideal man in Sardanapalus. The Sardanapalus in Delacroix's version of the story seems every bit the inferior man that European society would expect of him. He lazes on the enormous bed as the things he loves are destroyed in front of him. Delacroix's Sardanapalus is not a continuation of the poet king Byron presents who sends the palace slaves away – with the palace treasures – before dying on a pyre himself. Delacroix sticks to the traditional view of the Orient and depicts Sardanapalus as a weak king succumbing to defeat.

Orientalists became prevalent and they shaped racial stereotypes as well as gender stereotypes. The painter and collector Jules-Robert Auguste played a large role in this phenomenon. He visited the Near East sometime between 1815 and 1817 under the reign of Louis XVIII – the only artist of this time to do so. By 1824, Auguste owned a large collection of Oriental art that intrigued the European world and artists like Delacroix. He held a regular salon for Parisian artists and writers interested in the Near East. The increased awareness in all things Oriental was partly due to the Greek War of Independence that began in 1820. Paintings and stories of this time period capitalized on the vogue for Greek subject matter and increased exposure in Europe to events that

happened in the Orient, even if those events were highly dramatized for effect. Auguste's own works paid particular attention to ethnographic accuracy of Near Eastern people. By looking at these works, other artists and writers could get a better idea of what those in the Near East truly looked like without actually traveling there themselves.[39] This allowed such artists to show themselves as knowledgeable Orientalists and increase their credibility by having the details of Oriental culture portrayed with apparent accuracy.

An aspect of this Near Eastern culture that mesmerized Europeans greatly was the harem. There are countless images and stories of harems that come from the Romantic Movement, many of which were completed by Byron and Delacroix themselves. The harem was a symbol of male superiority since it was he who presided over it. Yet, in the eyes of Europeans, the harem woman remained defiant and elusive.[40] Myrrha's character certainly demonstrates this defiance. Several times she openly tells the king that she wishes he would have behaved differently than he did which is not something one would do to a king. Also, at the conclusion of the play, a servant Pania declares that he wishes to die with his king, and instead of Sardanapalus himself telling Pania to go, it is Myrrha who does so. She tells him that "'tis the soldier's part to die for his sovereign, and why not the woman's with her lover?"[41] When Pania does not want to leave his king "with but a single female to partake his death",[42] Myrrha forcefully explains again that it is her right to die with Sardanapalus, not his.

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[39] Rosenthal, 28.
[40] Joan DelPlato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem, 1800-1875*, Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2002, 239.
[41] Byron, 168.
[42] Ibid, 169.

Yet it is not just the perceived character of harem women that interested European men, the simple fact that the harem women were foreign made them all the more interesting. There was something innately sexual about the exotic and artists and writers alike took advantage of this.[43] Exoticism is not concerned with an exact documentary-like depiction of what went on in these harems but rather emphasizing differences between the culture of harems and that of Europe. This taste for the exotic focuses on cultures that are seen as distant and different, like Assyria in the Sardanapalus story. The difficult thing about highlighting the foreign aspect of a story is that exoticism cannot merely be what the audience expects it to be, nor can it be completely different. So, artists and writers who concerned themselves with the Orient continually walked a fine line between being too similar or too different from their native culture. In their portrayals of foreign lands where harems existed, men like Byron and Delacroix had to adhere to rules of gender relationships while still showing them to be varied from their own. By doing this, they allowed their audiences to remain outside the stories and pass judgment on cultures that were perceived as inferior.[44] The idea of a harem is in itself strange enough for a person living in England or France to comprehend, so they could not change too many large aspects of gender relationships or the exoticism would not be effective. Their stories would have been confusing rather than exciting.

The newly established standards of beauty and manliness became more complex with the increased interest in the Orient. There was a great focus on the women of the Orient and their great inferiority to the European man. Harems enthralled Westerners and

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[43] Pollock, 285.
[44] Frederick N. Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture: Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 10.

were continually used as examples of Oriental cultures. The men of the harem were the rulers and exercised close to absolute control over its members, yet they were still inferior to European men. Both the ideas concerning gender representations and representations of the Orient differed from country to country in Europe. Byron and Delacroix can serve as examples of the leading Orientalist countries: England and France.

ORIENTALISM IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

Ideas of Orientalism and its gender dynamics differed significantly between England and France. Byron wrote in England, where Orientalism took on a more documentary status whereas Delacroix painted in France, an area where Orientalism became synonymous with eroticism and fantasy. Both cultures abided by the gender standards set out in the first portion of this paper but the English stuck to a documentary-like approach to Near Eastern culture and the French explored a fantastical and erotic Orient.

The story of Sardanapalus itself is one of legend, yet Byron stuck to the facts of the story in most areas. Diodorus Siculus tells us that this king of luxury was responsible for the downfall of Assyria. Still Byron presents him as a hero. As a tale that may or may not be rooted in truth, it is important to understand that this English version from the 1820s was documentary in the sense that it stuck to the story that was handed down, not necessarily to historical facts.

English Orientalism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was typified by works like archaeological landscapes of David Roberts, illustrated travelogues of

Edward William Lane, detailed pictures of John Frederick Lewis, and typological biblical canvases of William Holman Hunt.[45] In Roberts's *The Temple at Dendera* (1841), (Figure 10) there is very specific attention to detail both in the depiction of the archaeological site and in the dress of the workers seen before the temple. This same critical eye was applied to Lewis's *The Hhareem, Cairo* (1850) (Figure 11), where we get a visual look inside a harem. When compared to Delacroix's vision of a harem in his *Death of Sardanapalus*, the blatant eroticism of the French is apparent. Lewis shows his concubines as fully clothed – the one in the back even wears her veil over her face – and the man, assumed to be the harem master, is simply sitting with the ladies and relaxing on the elaborate cushions. Lewis presents a symbiotic relationship between the two genders. While one is still superior to the other, they are existing together in harmony and there is no hint of tension due to the man's power.

Works of art like these are visual representations of the documentary-like approach of English Orientalism that Byron utilized in his works as well. English artists were concerned with the anthropological chronicling of the lives and customs of Near Eastern people. They did tend to place an emphasis on exotica and difference to European culture but not to the extent that the French did. The exotic and strange story of Sardanapalus was one Byron had been familiar with since he was twelve years old and he looked back to Diodorus Siculus's version when working on his tragedy.[46] Of course Byron took some liberties to make his tragedy more dramatic and to fill in storyline gaps. For example, there are no specifics in the ancient Greek account about the scene when

[45] Lewis, 110.
[46] Samuel Claggett Chew, *The Dramas of Lord Byron: A Critical Study*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1964, 104.

Zarina enters to say goodbye to her husband the king, or about the wishes of Pania, the loyal servant to Sardanapalus who wants to die with his king at the end. However, these elements are integral to Byron's story and to the dynamism of his characters. Nonetheless, even in these imagined scenes, Byron remains true to the basics of the legend of Sardanapalus. With these extra pieces, Byron also weaves in some anthropological chronicling of the lives of royalty in Assyria, if only in a general sense.

The documentary style of portraying cultures extended to gender issues as well. Byron's women range from debased harlots to saintly mothers. Each play and situation presents them differently.[47] In the first act of *Sardanapalus,* Salemenes is speaking of the glorious military conquests of former queen, Semiramis, and he refers to her as "a woman only".[48] He then praises her for accomplishing manly things, like expanding the Assyrian empire. Right away, Byron reminds his readers of woman's inferior status and we see that in this play, Byron is presenting his reader with the image of the dangers of women in power. Yet every time Sardanapalus refers to Myrrha, he calls her by some positive nickname, like "joy's true herald"[49] or "beautiful being"[50]. It is clear that the king has deep and devoted feelings for his slave, yet she remains just that, a slave to her master. Sardanapalus himself uses the word feminine to denote things that originate as bodily instincts rather than coming from a rational mind.[51] This harkens back to the newly established gender rule that men implied rational thinking and women represented irrationality and bodily needs.

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[47] Peter J. Manning, *Byron and His Fictions*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978, 27.
[48] Byron, 15.
[49] Ibid, 77.
[50] Ibid, 30.
[51] Malcolm Kelsall, "The Slave-Woman in the Harem," *Studies in Romanticism* 31, no. 3 (Fall 1992), 325.

With only a glance at Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* painting, it is apparent that he did not use a documentary-like approach. Delacroix packs an unrealistically high number of people into a tight space and creates an ambiguous background that gives a glimpse at the palace walls where the rebels are overcoming the king's remaining loyal troops. While Delacroix and the French were much more concerned with erotic fantasies of the Orient, there is still a hint of the same attention to detail that we saw with English anthropological accounts. Delacroix went to great lengths to study Oriental cultures, even forgoing the traditional trip to Italy for a journey to Morocco in 1832. During this trip, he immersed himself in Moroccan culture and brought back countless drawings of what he witnessed. There were seven notebooks of sketches still intact at the time of his death in 1863. [52] Many of these sketches were items of clothing or jewelry as well as some drawings of scenes or architectural environments. When he was in France, he also borrowed items from other Orientalists, like Auguste, for the details of his Oriental works. These preparations show how serious he was about remaining authentic to the things he observed.

Nevertheless, the main focus for Delacroix and French Orientalists was overtly erotic images. There are numerous examples of paintings of odalisques, nude slave girls being examined by clothed buyers, and the visits of the lord to his harem. Images like these were blatant fantasies of male dominance and female submission. By portraying the women nude and the men clothed, artists were not only showing how a harem slave may have actually been chosen but emphasizing differences between men and women in order

[52] Rosenthal, 43.

to make the women more vulnerable.[53] We see this same principle in Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*. The women are nude and sprawled about the room whereas the men are clothed and in control. In fact, Delacroix depicts Sardanapalus as the figure who is the most clothed. Only his face, one arm, and the tips of his feet are shown. However, the king's pose is reminiscent of the odalisques from various other French artists, such as Jean Auguste Ingres's *Grand Odalisque* from 1814. (Figure 12) While Ingres's odalisque figure has her back to us and is completely nude, she lies upon a grand couch of elaborate fabrics with her limbs somewhat twisted. Delacroix's Sardanapalus faces the viewer in a suggestive pose, with his head resting in his hand and legs spread wide open underneath his robes. This may be an indication of man's higher social position over women or a hint of the sexuality of an oriental scene like this one. The expressions of the women even show their helplessness at the hands of men. This is not something we see in Byron's tragedy. In his *Sardanapalus*, he never describes a woman as helpless. Yet another area where Delacroix's version of the tale diverges from Byron's ideas.

The women in Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* were typical for him, as he produced many scenes of female torture and victimization. However, he also created an allegory of outright feminine activism in his *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) (Figure 13).[54] The strong female character in the Sardanapalus story is Myrrha. Still, there is no evidence that Delacroix even included her in his *Death of Sardanapalus*. There have been theories that she may be the nude throwing herself onto the bed with Sardanapalus but the only indication this is the case is that Myrrha is the one who dies with the king in Byron's

[53] Rosenthal, 98.
[54] Doy, *Women and Visual Culture*…, 56.

tragedy. Even if we do submit to the theory that she is the woman on the bed, why then would Delacroix include the mass of other bodies in the painting rather than focus on the main characters? Also, Delacroix never mentioned the name Myrrha in his writings. This begs the question of why he would omit such a dramatic and powerful character from his portrayal. It is because a personality like hers would pull focus from what Delacroix was setting out to do with his work and actually take some of the power of this image away.

We know from his *Liberty Leading the People* that Delacroix was fully capable of depicting an active, influential woman. In this painting, there is an allegorical figure of Liberty itself unifying two groups of men with energy and conviction. Delacroix utilized the same structure as Jacques-Louis David's *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1796-1799) (Figure 14) by having an active woman in the center and active men to the sides. However, he rejected David's implications with this positioning. David's woman is a peacemaker but Delacroix's is a battle leader, a woman warrior. Delacroix is showing a powerful, heroic female character doing a manly task. Linda Nochlin has speculated what factors might justify placing a woman in such an aggressive and dominant role. The woman here is understood to be a substitution for missing male warriors. She is also a fictional character, so in this case, the crossing of the gender boundaries is not a large issue.[55] Including this allegory of a female leader was important to his purpose for painting *Liberty Leading the People* because her strength was necessary. Yet, this woman remains an allegory while it is the men who are concrete and realistically differentiated.[56]

[55] Doy, *Women and Visual Culture*…, 51.
[56] Ibid, 101.

By making Liberty a fictitious female, it is made known that it was the men who truly made the difference in the revolution.

If Delacroix had included a powerful female figure in his *Sardanapalus* as he had in *Liberty*, the focus would have been on her instead of the havoc and destruction surrounding her. In his notes for the Salon catalogue, Delacroix told the audience exactly what it was that he was depicting. "Sardanapalus is being besieged in his palace by the insurgents…reclining on a superb bed on top of a huge pyre, he orders the eunuchs and palace servants to cut the throats of his women and his pages, even of his favorite horses and dogs; none of the objects that had contributed to his pleasure must survive him."[57] There is no room for a commanding female figure here. There is also no need for any inspiration like that which the figure of Liberty gave the fighting men. It is a painting about the destruction of all the luxuries that gave Sardanapalus joy in his life and his insistence that none of these things were used for the pleasure of his enemies.

The waste of these treasures is another commentary that would be lacking had Delacroix focused on Myrrha in the scene. Byron presents all of Sardanapalus's luxuries as positive but Delacroix does the opposite. He portrays these riches as a corrupting force, something that makes Sardanapalus greedy and possessive. His king of Assyria is a villain, the opposite of the hero portrayed by Byron. Sardanapalus is shown having all of his treasures destroyed, with a childish "if I can't have it, no one can" mentality. Byron depicts this as heroic; that Sardanapalus will not let anything that gave him pleasure give

[57] Elspeth Davies, *Portrait of Delacroix*, Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1994, 39.

pleasure to his enemies. But Delacroix shows it to be wasteful and a contrast to European progress.

This dramatic scene, which actually does not appear in Byron's play, inspired artists from many countries. To further illustrate this discussion of differences between English and French Orientalism in relation to gender, I will use a comparison of Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* to an English version of the same point in the story, a print by John Martin called *The Fall of Nineveh* from 1830. (Figure 15) We have already discussed many specifics of Delacroix's portrayal and know his scene to be one of explicit violence, sexuality, and cruelty. This contrasts sharply with the nearly heroic, sentimentalized conception of Martin.[58]

In *The Fall of Nineveh*, we see a mass of soldiers in the foreground, progressing into the background and a massive palace as the backdrop. Many of the Ninevite soldiers who were still loyal to Sardanapalus are seen on the right breaking rank, fleeing in terror before the well-ordered invaders. In the lower left portion of the foreground, Sardanapalus can be seen at the edge of the steps, making gestures towards the pyre being constructed in front of him.[59] The rebels are advancing while men and women of the palace hold onto each other with knowledge of their imminent defeat.

Martin's depiction of the end of the Assyrian empire differs greatly from both Byron and Delacroix's stories. Martin chose to have the pyre built in an open space, outside the palace walls and he places the king in the center of the image. Delacroix's Sardanapalus is pushed off to the side and partially in shadow to diminish the amount of

[58] Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture…*, 56.
[59] Ibid, 53.

focus he is given by the audience. Martin elevated him above the crowd and made the viewer's eye immediately drawn to him. Like other English artists, Martin was more focused on documenting events and anthropological studies as the king is the main emphasis. On the other hand, Delacroix was more interested in the erotic drama of such a scene and leaves the documenting of culture to the smallest details, like the accuracy of depicting an Oriental shoe.[60] Delacroix's image corresponds more directly to what had been described in Byron's account than Martin's does and it is the drama that is given emphasis.

In terms of gender relationships there is also quite a great difference between the English and French examples. Martin includes the family in his print with men and women holding each other in the bottom of the image. With this, he presents an active, loving, and familial relationship between the sexes. There is also the notion of men fighting for their wives and daughters. Even the king's favorite concubine (most likely Myrrha, yet again she is not named in any writings about the print) can be seen resting her head gently on the king's chest as he gives orders.[61] The king himself is much more impressive in Martin's image than he is in Delacroix's Sardanapalus story. Sardanapalus is commanding in presence and in mid-action, ordering his servants to build his pyre. For Delacroix, Sardanapalus remains the king of luxury until the very end and simply lies atop his enormous bed while those around him are in action. He calmly watches as his concubines are abjectly murdered and shows little to no emotion.

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[60] Several drawings of the same shoe appear in the aforementioned sketchbooks Delacroix brought back with him from Morocco. This shoe appears in the final version of his *Death of Sardanapalus* on the eunuch in the foreground, slitting the woman's throat.

[61] Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, 56.

Such variances reflect altered social norms as well as different imaginations. Nochlin described Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* as a space into which the artist's own erotic and sadistic desires could be projected. She sees it as being about the French man's power over a woman rather than Western power over the Orient.[62] Frederick Bohrer disagrees and believes that both Delacroix's and Martin's depictions of the Sardanapalus story imply the power of the West over the East but concedes that Delacroix's does have the added implication of man's dominance over woman. Both scholars comment on an important point of these images, yet seem to miss the proverbial head of the nail by just a bit. Most Romantics, including Delacroix, believed the cultures and even the art of Near Eastern nations to be inferior to their own and the newly established gender relationships show that women were clearly viewed as inferior to men. [63] So while these images demonstrate the inferiority of both Oriental cultures and of women – as Bohrer suggests – they also emphasize the foreignness of the Near East. Both artist's images treat the Orient as a cautionary tale for the West, using the ancient Assyrian story as a moralizing tale and a warning. It is a counter-example to Western progress and shows what life would be like without the innovations of the West.

Each man, Byron and Delacroix, have utilized different approaches to feminity. Byron chose to portray women as dangerous if they were in control, yet still fragile and subservient to men. The language he uses throughout his play demonstrates this: Salemenes refers to Myrrha merely as "the Ionian slave"[64] and to Semiramis as "a woman

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[62] Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1989, 42.
[63] Rosenthal, 34.
[64] Byron, 9.

only"[65]. Delacroix's portrayal of women has varied from fragile and helpless to strong and in charge. He has shown with his *Liberty Leading the People* that he is quite capable of portraying a dominant female character, yet he did not include Myrrha in his *Sardanapalus* because if he had, the focus would have been on her rather than the luxuriousness of the king's life and the drama of all that luxury being destroyed.

No matter who tells the Sardanapalus story, it is always one of a king who crosses the gender boundaries and upsets his kingdom. Byron and Delacroix portray the gender standards differently but both portray Sardanapalus as effeminate. It is a matter of the way each artist handles the king's effeminacy that demonstrates how Delacroix refuses to give credence to the alternative ideal man that Byron puts forth.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

From the very beginning of the story, it is noted that Sardanapalus is effeminate. He has monikers like "she-king" and a man who is "less than a woman".[66] Salemenes is adamant that he is the brother of Zarina, *not* Sardanapalus, so as not to be linked to the king too strongly. Sardanapalus makes it plain that he much prefers banquets to battles. He does not behave as his kingdom would expect or want and that is the major cause of the rebellion – his people do not believe he is fit to rule. Yet, as the king himself points out, his people are well fed, the land is in peace, and he provides all he can for them. The trope of men and women crossing gender boundaries is one that runs throughout Byron's

[65] Byron, 15.
[66] Ibid, 46.

play and is a major element of Delacroix's painting. As a writer or artist, it was imperative to not venture too far from the accepted norms for each gender. If the reversal of roles was too strong, the emotional or political message could easily be lost.[67]

Byron's play is not simply about Sardanapalus as king but about the cultural rules within which he acts and by which he is acted upon. It also concerns the intricate ways gender is constructed by such interactions. Sardanapalus is the harem master, yet he shows a deep respect for his favorite concubine. He is a reluctant king, yet he heroically defends his lands when needed.[68] The details Byron uses to add drama contextualize events that occur and are necessary to move the story along. Still, the fact that Sardanapalus is an *effeminate* king remains the focus. At this time, to be effeminate meant "to become womanish; to grow weak and languish".[69] These are things that Sardanapalus is directly accused of in Byron's play.

With the blurring of gender divisions brought about by the Romantic Movement, Byron's tragedy was sure to cause a stir in literary circles. Crossing gender boundaries seemed to be a favored theme for Byron. He had already written stories of effeminate men by the time he wrote *Sardanapalus*. In an earlier work, *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), a man named Selim is the effeminate protagonist. He is in love with a woman, Zuleika, who was ordered by her father to marry an elderly suitor. Naturally the father is not pleased when she goes against his will to be with Selim, especially since he is so womanly.[70]

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[67] Doy, *Women and Visual Culture…*, 48.
[68] Wolfson, 870.
[69] Behrendt, 170.
[70] Manning, 40.

Since Byron was pushing forth a new ideal for man, it is interesting to note that his ideal woman is traditional. She is motherly, caring, and most of all, passive. In his writing, his attitude towards women has quite a hostile component. Women are shown to be both skilled with nurturing children and are shunned for impeding a child's freedom. They are often depicted as fragile daughters but also as incredibly dangerous when powerful.[71] Byron's presentation of an alternative ideal man is contrasted by his portrayal of Myrrha's character. While she is shown to take action and even spurs the king into action, her qualities are not those of a ruler. She is impulsive and violent. Unlike when he challenges the standards for men, Byron does not challenge the standards for women. He is demonstrating the limits of Myrrha's – and therefore woman's – point of view. The ideal man uses rational thought to rule his actions and does not act with haste or without judgement as Myrrha does. Women are shown to be dangerous when given power and sometimes even instigate bad manly ideals. For instance, when it is discovered that Arbaces and Beleses are conspiring against Sardanapalus, he merely exiles them. Myrrha then says that she would have rather seen them killed. So, Myrrha's character is shunned for the same reasons as Sardanapalus's: not acting as she should for her gender according to the established gender roles.

When we look at the character of Myrrha more closely, we find that she is both dynamic and bound by stereotypes. At the beginning of the play, she is a slave to man, the personification of feminine devotion to a masculine master – Byron's ideal woman. Her confinement to the harem symbolizes this historic enslavement of woman to man

[71] Manning, 42.

and, since she is Greek, the enslavement of Greeks by the Ottomans.[72] However, soon she is given a much larger purpose within the story; she arouses a degraded and sated monarch into action when he is most needed. In a way, she can be viewed as crossing a gender boundary when she springs to action much in the same way Judith did when she slayed Holofernes. For a brief time, she became the embodiment of Nike and served as a substitution for a male warrior, in this case the king himself. Then, when he was finally spurred into action himself, she regressed into her fragile, slave state.

The idea of the woman warrior in *Sardanapalus* is dealt with in a somewhat indirect manner. While Myrrha never actually sees battle, she does threaten to join the fight if Sardanapalus does not and it is she who suggests more violent punishments for those who wrong the king. When Myrrha suggests a much more violent solution to the treacherous plot against the king, Sardanapalus is surprised by her viciousness but dismisses it as her feminine nature. He claims that when roused to wrath, women are "timidly vindictive to a pitch of perseverance".[73] She shows this ferocious side again towards the end of the play. After it is clear that the battle is lost for Sardanapalus, he returns to the palace from the fighting to make his pyre but just as he orders servants to do this, a herald arrives from the rebels. This man tells them that the newly crowned king, Arbaces, has offered Sardanapalus to live out his life in peace if he were to give up his three young sons as hostages. Sardanapalus's first reaction is to throw the man from the ramparts, something that may have been expected from a manly king but after some

[72] Kelsall, 315.
[73] Byron, 80.

thought, he decides that it was not the herald's offer and spares him. Myrrha does not agree with this decision and, again, would have rather had the man killed.[74]

The fact that a woman is more violent and is the one who spurs the king to action is in keeping with the kingdom's opinion of Sardanapalus's manliness. Salemenes starts off Byron's play complaining of the king's behavior and says "his diadem lies negligently by to be caught up by the first manly hand which dares to snatch it".[75] For a moment, Myrrha seems to fill the void left by Sardanapalus, yet she does not wish to take his position; she wants to help him become the man he needs to be for his kingdom. Contrary to what people of his kingdom believed, Sardanapalus already possessed some quite manly attributes: he could control his violent nature and listen to reason, he exercised good rational thought with the ruling of his kingdom, and he ruled the best way he knew how even though it may not have been what others expected of him.

Firstly, Sardanapalus does react with violence several times throughout the play. In the first act when Salemenes chastised him for not behaving as a good king should, Sardanapalus replies with "I can at least command myself, who listen to language such as this; yet urge me not beyond my easy nature".[76] This is clearly a threat to his brother-in-law to watch his tongue and be mindful of with whom he is speaking. Also, it is one of the principles of manliness to have willpower and restraint, both of which Sardanapalus exercises here. He demonstrates this same self-control when he spares the herald's life near the end of the play. He hears the man's plea and realizes that he only did his duty to Arbaces and had he not done so, he would have been killed anyway. He sends the herald

[74] Byron, 164.
[75] Ibid, 7.
[76] Ibid, 11.

away asking for an hour of peace to decide on a course of action, although he already knows he will continue with his plan to construct the pyre and die on it.

Secondly, Sardanapalus's effeminate nature is part of his wish to not rule with the might of his army but with his mind. When Salemenes glorifies Semiramis for her military conquests despite the fact that she was a woman, Sardanapalus points out the number of lives she lost with her campaigns and that Assyria gained nothing but more land to govern. He knows that conquest feeds on itself; more territory means more protection and maintenance. By not expanding Assyria's borders, he is breaking a tradition but for good reasons. His goal was not to conquer but to make his people's lives better and filled with less misery. "If they hate me, 'tis because I hate not. If they rebel, it is because I oppress not."[77] It was his opinion that it was better to sway one's enemies than subdue them.

Thirdly, by not giving in to what everyone wants him to be, Sardanapalus acts as he wishes and how he believes to be best. He refuses to conform to other's expectations while asking those around him to treat him as an individual rather than a figure head. The lifestyle he leads is not one of laziness but intentional choice. He wants to rule as a monarch, not a master or tyrant.[78] Byron writes him as both a king of luxury and a hero. Being himself and ruling as he sees fit, Sardanapalus provides his people with good lives, plenty of food, and no wars to claim the lives of their men. He is a great ruler. Yet, Delacroix chose to depict him as loafing on a bed, completely passive. He does not

[77] Byron, 30.
[78] Behrendt, 169.

engage in any of the activities surrounding him and is even separated from the rest in space.

Even though Sardanapalus did possess some manly qualities, the manner of his dress, his constant feasting, and disinterest in conquest made his people see him as a she-king. In his opening soliloquy, Salemenes describes Sardanapalus as a king who has failed his family, his citizens, and his heritage. These views are only strengthened when the king refuses to fill the power vacuum at the beginning of the rebellion and Myrrha – a woman – does just that.[79] When Sardanapalus learns of Arbaces and Beleses's plot against him, he does not believe it at first. Salemenes and Myrrha wish to have both traitors killed, or at least imprisoned but Sardanapalus spares their lives. Soon after, he concedes to have them exiled but quietly so as to not hurt their reputations. The sparing of their lives causes Arbaces to doubt their purpose for rebellion. He knows that Salemenes would have slain them had the king not intervened and calls this a noble act. For this brief moment, Arbaces sees Sardanapalus as Byron was portraying him: a poet king who was benevolent and ruled his kingdom well. Beleses rebukes him for his wavering ambition, even going so far as to call him Sardanapalus, for he "knows no name more ignominious".[80]

Another aspect of his effeminate behavior, it is shown throughout the play that Sardanapalus cares a lot about his appearance. He enters rooms with flowing robes and flowers in his hair. When he finally does enter battle, he chides his servants for not bringing the helmet that has precious stones on it. Instead, they brought a plain helmet

[79] Kelsall, 324.
[80] Byron, 67.

that would protect his head better. Rather than wear the ugly helmet, Sardanapalus chooses to go into battle with no helmet at all.[81] This may seem incredibly vain at first but it is important to note that in ancient Near Eastern cultures, appearances were an incredibly important aspect of kingship.

Kings throughout the ancient Near East kept their beards and hair neatly curled at all times, especially since they were the connection to the gods. As an example, we can look to the bust of an Akkadian King from Nineveh. (Figure 15) It is from the Dynasty of Agade (2330-2180 BC) and represents the physical ideals of an Akkadian king. The glorious beard with its long, neat curls, plated band of hair and unibrow are all aspects of the way a king was meant to look. This elaborate hairstyle was actually seen as quite manly during this time. [82] Sardanapalus was king during the Assyrian empire, which lasted from approximately 1365-609 BC, centuries after the time of the Akkadian king of the bust, but the ideals of kingship remained mostly the same throughout the ancient Near Eastern timeline. From this, we can see just how important it would have been for Sardanapalus to look like a king when he rode onto the battlefield. The men would have drawn inspiration from him, looking as glorious as a king should and hopefully would have rallied against the rebels – much like the effect Byron produced when he arrived in Missolonghi. So, ironically, if Sardanapalus were a real historical king of Assyria, his preference for the grand helmet over the plain one would have been completely a normal and manly preference.

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[81] Byron, 90.
[82] Ilse Seibert, *Women in the Ancient Near East*, New York: Abner Schram, 1974, 17.

Still, writing and painting in the nineteenth century, Byron and Delacroix's audiences were not aware of the ideals of kingship and the standards of the ancient Near East. But, they certainly would have been aware of the standards of manliness for their own time period, so those were the rules against which Sardanapalus was judged. By their ideals, the battle should have been more important to him than his looks. While it is true that physical appearance began to factor into a man's apparent worth at this time, it would have been more important that a king defend his lands than worry about his appearance. The argument of nineteenth century Europeans would have been that Sardanapalus should have inherently looked handsome by behaving in such a manly or honorable fashion, since the moral worth of the soul was seen to have an effect on one's outward appearance. Subsequently, the audience for Byron and Delacroix's works saw Sardanapalus as a womanly king, just as characters like Salemenes viewed him.

CONCLUSION

Byron and Delacroix's Sardanapalus transgresses the gender expectations in several ways throughout the story. Sardanapalus is expected to continue the tradition of expanding territories of the Assyrian empire, like his ancestors before him, yet he seems to only concern himself with pleasurable activities like feasting with women of his harem. However, he has his reasons for behaving in this way. As Byron portrays him, he is actually behaving in a manly manner, he is just not perceived to be doing so. He simply is a man who does not revel in the glory of battle for the purpose of battle or expansion of territory alone. Byron presents him as a poet, one who hated all pain, given or received but in Delacroix's painting, he orders his eunuchs to destroy all the things that brought

him pleasure.[83] In both instances, he is behaving in a manner other than what was expected of him and further alienating himself from the gender norms.

The ideals of both male and female characters are presented in Byron's *Sardanapalus*. Myrrha represents both the ideal and the contrast to the ideal woman. She is ideal when she is subservient to Sardanapalus and merely does as he requests but is the opposite of ideal when she urges him to act more violently. Zarina is also an example of the ideal woman. She is a loving wife to the king and does not hold it against him that he has a favored concubine or that he is not involved in her life or the lives of their children. Loyal to the end, she is sad to leave him and is upset at the thought of leaving him to die. Sardanapalus is obviously not a representative of the nineteenth century ideal man, since his people rebelled because he was not acting as they felt he should as king. The typical ideal man is found in the character of Salemenes. He is the epitome of manliness as a leader of soldiers and dies a heroic death in battle. There is an intense juxtaposition between the characters of Sardanapalus and Salemenes. Salemenes is exactly what the people want in their king but Byron shows that his attributes would not have made the best king. With these two men, Byron is including both the traditional ideal man – Salemenes – and his own alternative – Sardanapalus. Furthermore, Byron is depicting his alternative ideal man as superior to the traditional as Sardanapalus outlives Salemenes and is given a grander death.

With the peak of Orientalism in the mid-nineteenth century, Orientalist images were in every genre of art: history, genre, architecture, landscapes, portrait, and animal

[83] Davies, 40.

paintings. Scenes of the Near East hung in bourgeois homes, some even had Oriental nooks designed to resemble tiled interiors of the Orient.[84] Eroticism became more explicit toward the end of the nineteenth century and Byronic subjects were common. Paris was the unquestioned capital of Orientalism. Many European painters from countries other than France actually began their careers under the instruction, or imitating the style, of a French master. Next to the French, the British produced the largest and most distinguished group of Orientalists in Europe.[85] As leaders in English and French art and literature, Byron and Delacroix exemplified what Orientalism meant to their countries. Byron used a more documentary approach to his Sardanapalus story and added details of gender relationships for drama and intrigue. Delacroix emphasized the eroticism and fantastical aspects of this Near Eastern story and highlighted those features in his painting.

The fact that Sardanapalus crossed expected gender boundaries was not only an issue for the people in the story who rebelled but for those who read the story or saw it represented in a painting. The very idea of a "she-king" was a contradiction to the typical Byronic hero and was not what readers of Byronic literature had come to expect from him.[86] While it is true that an effeminate character was not new to Byron, it was jarring that a king as effeminate as Sardanapalus was featured as Byron's hero. What the audiences of this story did not consider is that Sardanapalus was quite manly, merely in a different way than the ideals that had been established. He reacted with force when it was required, wanted to rule his people with ideas rather than expanding the empire for the

[84] Rosenthal, 93.
[85] Ibid, 127.
[86] Behrendt, 170.

mere sake of expansion, and refused to conform to what was expected and behaved as he wished. Even though credit for Delacroix's inspiration for his *Death of Sardanapalus* often goes to Byron, these two men presented quite different commentaries on gender standards. Byron portrayed the king as a poet, one much like himself who was a new ideal man while Delacroix rejected this idea and depicted his men and women in traditional roles.

FIGURES

Fig. 1: Eugène Delacroix,
Death of Sardanapalus.
1828, Oil on canvas, 392 x 496 cm.
Musée du Louvre.
From: The Louvre, www.louvre.fr/en.

Fig. 2: Henriette Browne,
A Visit to a Harem.
1860, Oil on canvas, Private Collection.
From: Sakip Sabanci Müzesi, "The 1001 Faces of Orientalism" Exhibition, www.sakipsabancimuzesi.org/en.

Fig. 3: Theodoros Vryzakis, *Byron's Arrival at Missolonghi*.
1861, Oil on canvas, 155 x 213 cm.
National Gallery of Greece.
From: National Gallery of Greece, www.nationalgallery.gr.

Fig. 4: Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*.
1598-1599, Oil on canvas, 145 x 195 cm.
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica.
From: Galleria Nazionale d'Art Antica, galleriabarberini.beniculturali.it.

Fig. 5: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*.
Ca. 1614-1620, Oil on canvas, 158.8 x 125.5 cm.
Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte.
From: Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, www.polomusealenapoli.beniculturali.it

Fig. 6: Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*.
Ca. 1485, Tempera and oil on poplar, 69.2 x 173.4 cm.
The National Gallery, London.
From: The National Gallery, www.thenationalgallery.org.uk.

Fig. 7: Peter Paul Rubens, *Samson and Delilah*.
1609-1610, Oil on wood, 185 x 205 cm.
The National Gallery, London.
From: The National Gallery, www.thenationalgallery.org.uk.

Fig. 8: Eugène Delacroix, *Medea*.
1838, Oil on canvas, 260 x 165 cm.
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille, France.
From: Musée des Beaux-Arts,
www.pba-lille.fr.

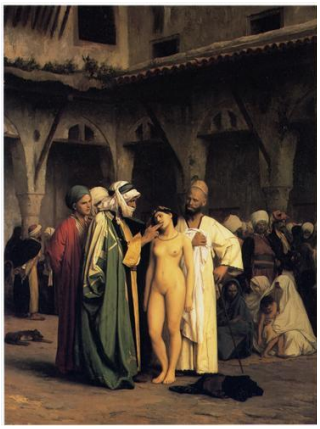

Fig. 9: Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Slave Market.*
1866, Oil on canvas, 84.8 x 63.5 cm.
Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA.
From: Clark Art Institute,
www.clarkart.edu.

Fig. 10: David Roberts, *Temple at Dendera*.
1841, Oil on canvas, 119.3 x 212 cm.
Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives.
From: BBC, Your Paintings,
www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings.

Fig. 11: John Frederick Lewis,
The Hhareem, Cairo.
Ca. 1850, Watercolor, 47 x 67.3 cm.
Victoria and Albert Museum.
From: Victoria and Albert Museum,
collections.vam.ac.uk.

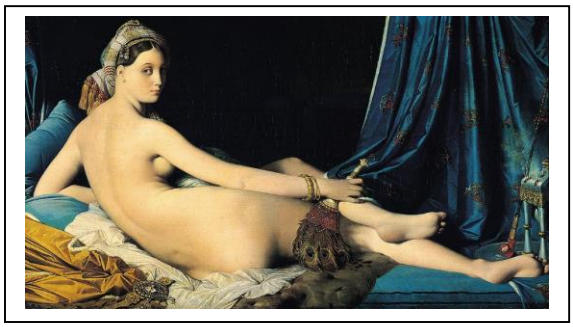

Fig. 12: Jean Auguste Ingres,
Grand Odalisque.
1814, Oil on canvas, 91 x 162 cm.
Musée du Louvre.
From: The Louvre, www.louvre.fr/en.

Fig. 13: Eugène Delacroix,
Liberty Leading the People.
1830, Oil on canvas, 260 x 325 cm.
Musée du Louvre.
From: The Louvre, www.louvre.fr/en.

Fig. 14: Jacques-Louis David,
The Intervention of the Sabine Women.
1799, 385 x 522 cm.
Musée du Louvre.
From: The Louvre, www.louvre.fr/en.

Fig. 15: John Martin,
The Fall of Nineveh.
1829, Mezzotint with etching print,
53.4 x 80 cm.
Art Gallery of New South Wales.
From: Art Gallery of New South Wales,
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au.

Fig. 16: Unknown artist,
Akkadian King Bust or
Head of Sargon the Great.
2300-2200 BC, Copper alloy,
52.5 x 21 cm.
The Iraq Museum.
From: The Iraq Museum,
www.theiraqmuseum.org.

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